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Krigaren och transvestiten: Gestaltningar av mörker och maskuliniteter i finländsk black metal [The Warrior and the Transvestite: Characterizations of Darkness and Masculinities in Finnish Black Metal], by Mikael Sarelin, Åbo, Åbo Akademis förlag, 208 pp., ISBN 978-951-765-682-5.

Heavy metal music is an evolution of the hard rock of the 1970s that took on its own style and culture: a macho, working class masculinity embodied in heavy music that has characterized the genre from the earliest days. The genre diversified with time, developing a broad range of sounds and subgenres that are now grouped under the umbrella term “metal.” One of these subgenres is black metal which became popular in the 1990s and Mikael Sarelin, in his doctoral dissertation *Krigaren och transvestiten: Gestaltningar av mörker och maskuliniteter i finländsk black metal* [The Warrior and the Transvestite: Characterizations of Darkness and Masculinities in Finnish Black Metal], set out to understand more about the ways in which themes of darkness were portrayed in this scene, only to become increasingly aware of the importance of black metal’s gendered performances. *Krigaren och transvestiten* has clear aims which reflect this journey. First, Sarelin aims to give historical perspective on networks within Finnish black metal and how the genre developed into its current form. Second, he aims to investigate the ways darkness is represented within black metal and how it is interpreted by active members of the Finnish scene. Finally, his most central aim is to “investigate and analyze interpretations [*gestaltningar*] of masculinities within Finnish black metal” (p. 12), that is, how masculinities are constructed and expressed within the scene.

Sarelin’s primary contribution is his description of the Finnish black metal scene’s homosociality, heteronormativity, and performance of a masculinity integral to black metal which he dubs “The Warrior.” The Warrior’s performance is tightly connected with the stereotypical appearance of black metal bands; a band shirt, black jeans, and a bullet belt, while often completing this outfit

with a black leather jacket and face paint called “corpse paint.” The paint is a white base with black around the eyes, applied in ways that make an individual look grim or dead. Long hair or shaved heads show off an individual’s warlike aggression, while the use of spikes, bullet belts, and (anti-)religious symbols (inverted crosses or pagan symbols) are used to show a black metallar’s individualistic credentials and ideological commitment to the scene. Sarelin argues that The Warrior should be seen as a protest masculinity, demonstrating through his analysis of interviews and observations that the warrior “confirms society’s primary hegemonic masculinity while exaggerating it” (p. 169). Despite this dominant performance, however, Sarelin also documented bands that performed what he interpreted as a subversive masculinity (“The Transvestite”). These two bands were met with discomfort and sometimes aggression, despite (or, in this case, because they were) performing what could be characterized as *compulsory individualism*—a norm that everyone in the scene sees himself as being unassailably unique and independent of influence. Sarelin presents this dualism between The Warrior and The Transvestite as serving different functions for the scene: the former is a societal critique of Western culture, symbolically represented by Christianity; the latter questions the scene itself, subverts acceptable norms by cross-dressing, and shocks through the use of imagery that invokes incest, sadomasochism, and other forms of deviant sexual behavior.

A secondary contribution of *Krigaren och transvestiten* is to give a context to the development of the genre of black metal in a country that receives little attention on an international stage. Black metal is a controversial subgenre of metal—a style punctuated with aggressive, pummeling drums, shrieking vocals, and often poor or intentionally tinny production, as well as being closely tied to Satanism, paganism and in some cases neo-Nazi movements. While well known internationally today, black metal became recognized because of the Norwegian scene, which

produced not only novel music, but multiple church arsons and even culminated in the murder of one of the founders of the scene (Moynihan & Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos*, 1998). The story of the Norwegian scene has been told repeatedly since it happened, but Sarelin's account of the Finnish scene's development at a similar time offers a novel look at differences, but also the striking similarities. The similarities in costuming, musical styles, thematic approaches, and ideological statements against Christianity and in favor of radically individualistic religious expression seem shared across borders. Despite this, Sarelin's informants claim that the Finnish black metal scene arose before the Norwegian one, or at least parallel with it (p. 104). This claim is illustrative of an ongoing tension in this work between seeing the object of the study as international or local, which proves to be a difficult balancing act.

The stated aim of placing Finnish black metal in a historical context creates a problem for what later becomes an analysis of the scene in a vacuum. Sarelin shows just how much of the Finnish black metal scene is the result of the reach of aspects of different cultures in a globalized world: An English band's record *Black Metal* is the root of the name; LaVeyan Satanism is an American phenomenon; the scene's pagan traditions are Old Norse beliefs, not Finnish national romance; Neo-Nazism's association with black metal started in Norway. However, Sarelin draws conclusions about the tendencies of the Finnish black metal scene based on local culture and history, pointing to the traditions of Finnish heavy rock and Finnish tango and a pan-Scandinavian melancholy as being contributing factors to black metal in Finland. Problematically, however, he does not show that there is anything about Finnish black metal that differentiates it meaningfully from any other scene.

The argumentation about representations of masculinities in Finnish black metal has a similar problem. While Sarelin quotes an Israeli black metallor as saying that without the characteristics

of a warrior, one cannot play black metal (p. 167), he goes on to tie the Finnish concept of *äijä* to the masculinities expressed in black metal. An *äijä* has no direct translation into English, but it is exemplified by a type of tough, anti-modern man who is defined in relation to soft or “metrosexual” men (p. 163). The informants who represented this were the ones who showed their adherence to the dress code of black, spikes and leather, as well as expressing violent and anti-Christian rhetoric, anti-modernistic attitudes towards technology, emotions, and misogynistic attitudes in lyrics and towards women’s participation in the scene. For Sarelin (p. 162), *äijä* is an ideal man “from a bygone time,” represented by the hardworking lumberjack—a positively loaded working class masculinity which is straight backed, honor bound and macho. This insight into Finnish culture and history is interesting, but left me wondering how a Finnish *äijä* man differs from all of the other anti-modern black metal men in an international scene who share common masculine expressions. Sarelin’s own observations are taken from shows where Norwegian and Polish black metal bands played in Finland and he makes no mention of a difference in the expressions of masculinity with either of these bands. To the contrary, he mentions “The Eastern Front” tour by the Norwegian band as an example of militarism in the black metal scene. The frequent gliding of the local into the international (and vice versa) is an ongoing tension which implies that a study with delimitations which did not stop at the borders of the nation-state may have been more analytically giving. Further, it reflects a missed chance to theorize about masculinities and globalization, where the medium of black metal is the bearer of the message.

The heart of this work, however, is the way in which two bands from Sarelin’s field observations seemed to challenge The Warrior performance of the Finnish scene. These two bands stood out by violating the visual norms in their stage performances by cross-dressing, playing at

homosexuality, and turning violence against themselves in masochistic stage performances.

Sarelin interprets these performances as pushing the boundaries of gender norms and behavior to shock the black metal scene in order to stop stagnation (p. 176). By wearing corsets, dressing up like little girls, dousing themselves with blood (which he interprets as menstrual blood, but given the child's dress, and the children's props could also have symbolized child abuse or rape), Sarelin states that these bands are *subverting* the dominant expression of the protest masculinity associated with black metal. By subversion he means things which question, challenge or do parodies of dominant heteronorms in a society (p. 12). These subversive performances were met with mixed responses from crowds and occasionally outright aggression. According to one account, band members were even assaulted (p. 178), implying that they were seen as crossing lines.

Sarelin's interpretation of The Transvestite as a subversion of scene-appropriate masculinity made me wonder: are bands that associate cross-dressing, homosexuality, incest, and child abuse really being subversive in the queer-theoretical sense? Homophobic tropes have long linked homosexuality with pedophilia and BDSM, for example, and in this case, these performances could instead be portrayed not as subversive, but confirmatory. I was surprised to not see this argument, as in the theoretical background Sarelin presents it. Relying on Fanny Ambjörnsson, he says that heterosexual norms are maintained through strategies of "mockery, pathologization, demonization, and making something seem incomprehensible," and further "stereotyping of deviance is one method through which normative heterosexuality is maintained" (p. 37). Yet in the analysis of The Transvestite's performances in these two situations, there is no real discussion of the ways in which the queer elements of drag become connected to the 'sexually deviant' elements of these performances.

Further, in a black metal scene that Sarelin himself portrays as being highly conformist, while paradoxically valuing radical individuality, would not another reasonable explanation for these performances be that the shock value of drag is seen as an easy way to mock this paradox? This expression could simply be a provocation aimed at a scene that is hard to shock, since impaled pig heads, faux crucifixions, and fake blood are commonplace at black metal shows. The provocative nature of these acts could be both means and ends, leaning on the boundaries of a scene that is supposed to celebrate individuality, but does not do so in all cases. While Sarelin does point to the role of that shock value likely plays in the choices being made, his interpretation of both motive (questioning gender norms and heteronorms) and consequence (progression of the scene) are unconvincing in light of the evidence presented. Further, as motive cannot be known, it seems to give too much credit to possibly pathologizing performances of drag.

Krigaren och transvestiten offers an analysis of an interesting moment in black metal history, but its core contribution rests on material and conclusions which can easily be problematized.

However, this book points in two interesting directions. First, to what extent can one say that there is a uniformity of masculine performances of black metal internationally? What does this mean for theorizing hegemonic masculinities or protest masculinities when they are put into a global context? And does the medium of black metal carry the message of a certain performance of masculinity internationally? Second, Sarelin mentions, but does not deeply analyze, what I earlier called the scene's compulsory individualism. A running theme of this work is that the scene's ideology, politics, or religious statements all support an ideology of radical individualism. Not only is this an interesting area for further investigation, but it casts a different light on The Transvestite in this story: subverting conformity through radical, offensive individuality. It is really the most black metal thing one can do.

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